Secondary Data Analyses of Strengthening Families Datasets: 2014 Grantees

Colleen Heflin

Project Title: Economic Strain and Family Formation
Project Funding Years: 2014 – 2016
Affiliation: University of Missouri
Project Abstract: Material hardship is an important measure of economic well-being, especially for disadvantaged households, and has been part of attempts to understand the relationship between family structure, household well-being and poverty. In this study advanced econometric techniques to analyze longitudinal data from the Building Strong Families (BSF) 2002-2012 dataset will be used, in order to increase policymakers' understanding of the relationship between material hardship and family formation, and in particular, to understand how family strengthening programs mediate that relationship. The project has three specific aims: (1) Explore whether material hardship acts as a selection factor in family formation and relationship satisfaction. In other words, are strengthening family programs more successful for families with lower levels of material hardship? (2) Explore the effects of family formation on economic strain. In other words, do family formation and improved relationship quality reduce material hardship? (3) Explore the effects of social safety net participation on the success of family strengthening programs and families' economic strain. In other words, does participation in social safety net programs improve relationship and economic outcomes for families? This proposal will take advantage of the unique BSF data to address inconsistencies and limitations in the prior research. In particular, the study will disentangle the causal direction; it will look at whether economic well-being exerts a strong effect on selection into marriage or whether it is more accurate to say that some aspects of marriage cause, or make more likely, certain economic outcomes. Because the BSF data is longitudinal, this research will use stronger causal modeling strategies than have been applied to these questions before.
Sample: BSF data which includes 5,100 couples.
Measures:
Marriage (married or cohabitating)
Relationship Quality
- Happiness
- Support & affection
- Constructive conflict behaviors
- Destructive conflict behaviors
- Fidelity

Economic Strain
- Household income is below the monthly poverty line
- Household had utilities disconnected in the last year
- Household did not pay all of their rent in the last year
- Household was evicted in the last year
- Social Program Participation (income from TANF or SNAP)

Control Variables
- Initial relationship status and quality (e.g. the outcome measures described above, the probability of marrying current partner, and whether individuals have previous children from other partners)
- Baseline demographic characteristics (e.g. race and ethnicity, age, education level, and English language proficiency)
- Contextual characteristics (e.g. religiosity, income, employment status, psychological distress, and social support)
- Length of time (in weeks) between follow-up interviews

Christina M. Gibson-Davis and Anna Gassman-Pines

Project Title: Meeting the bar: A propensity score analysis of BSF impacts by couples' economic status
Project Funding Years: 2015 - 2016
Affiliation: Duke University
Project Abstract: The study hypothesizes that the Building Strong Families (BSF) program will positively impact marriage for those couples who met the economic bar, but not the couples who did not meet the economic bar and that meeting the economic bar will moderate BSF treatment impacts in other areas, like parenting and child well-being. BSF survey data from the baseline, 15, and 36 month waves will be utilized to address the following goals: (1) Create an "economic bar to marriage" index, based on employment, earnings, job characteristics, material hardship, and asset ownership; (2) Develop propensity scores using baseline characteristics to predict which treatment and control couples were likely to meet the economic bar; and (3) Examine BSF program impacts on those couples predicted to meet the economic bar, compared to those couples predicted not to meet the economic bar, on measures of marital status, relationship quality, parent-child interactions, and child well-being. This study addresses a gap in the research literature by examining who, among low-income parents, meets the economic bar to marriage. It also addresses an unanswered question, namely, how BSF program impacts varied by couples' experiences of meeting the economic bar. The findings will benefit family strengthening policies by suggesting that future programs have both a financial and relationship-skills training component or that relationship-skill training programs be targeted to couples who have met the economic bar.
Sample: All the couples who participated in at least one follow-up round (either 15 or 36 months) in the BSF impact evaluation dataset; a large sample of low-income, unmarried parents or couples who are expecting a child and who were interested in a relationship skills program.
Measures:
The economic bar to marriage index:
- Employment
- Health insurance
- Earnings growth
- Home ownership
- Bank Account
- Material hardship
- Public assistance

Baseline covariates
- Mothers' and fathers' ages
- Mothers' and fathers' race and ethnicity
- Mothers' and fathers' education
- Whether the mother was pregnant
- Whether the couple was living together
- The number of children the couple has together
- Whether the mothers and fathers were currently employed
- Mothers' and fathers' earnings
- Whether the family received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and/or Food Stamps (SNAP) in the last month
- Mothers' and fathers' depression scores
- Mothers' and fathers' perceived relationship quality

Primary outcome variables
- Marriage
- Relationship quality

Secondary outcome variables
- Parenting outcomes
  - Parental responsiveness
  - Hostile parenting
  - Parental warmth
  - Parent's engagement in cognitive and social play
  - Parent's use of harsh discipline
  - Parenting stress and aggravation
- Child outcomes
  - Behavior problems
  - Emotional insecurity
  - Empathy
  - Receptive language
  - Sustained attention

Melissa Barnett

Project Title: Different Forms of Family Instability: Key Mechanisms Linking Family Strengthening Interventions, Family Functioning and Child Wellbeing

Project Funding Years: 2015 - 2016

University Affiliation: Arizona Board of Regents, University of Arizona

Project Abstract: The goal of this study is to examine how participation in the Building Strong Families (BSF) intervention caused families to experience reductions in three different forms of familyinstability (e.g., financial, family structure, romantic relationship quality), that in turn bolster child development via stronger father involvement and higher quality coparenting relationships. This project includes three specific aims: (1) To examine the associations between participation in BSF and financial, family structure, and romantic relationship instability out to 36 months post-intervention; (2) To examine the extent to which reductions in each form of family instability mediate the effects of the BSF intervention on father involvement and coparenting quality at 36 months post-intervention; and (3) To examine the

extent to which father involvement and coparenting quality mediate associations between each form of instability and children's behavior problems and language development at 36 months post-intervention. By examining multiple forms of family instability as intervention pathways, the study will inform future intervention work aimed at strengthening relationships and wellbeing among economically disadvantaged families across the transition to parenthood.

Sample: Participants in the BSF dataset that have data on all relevant study variables

Measures:

Financial Instability Indexes
- Financial Instability
- Family Structure Instability
- Romantic Relationship Quality Instability

Family Processes
  - Father Involvement Responsibility
  - Accessibility
  - Engagement
  - Coparenting

Child Development Outcomes
- Behavior Problems
- Child Language

Steve Shamblen

Project Title: A Marriage Saved is a Penny Earned: The Economic Benefits of Marriage Education Programs

Project Funding Years: 2014-2016

Affiliation: Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation

Abstract: Despite the often small effects found when implementing marriage and family strengthening programs, these programs can be shown to have very large and important financial impacts on the population. Expected Value-Return on investment (EV-ROI) models previously developed by the project team will be expanded and applied to an evaluation of the Support Healthy Marriage (SHM) program funded by the Administration for Children and Families. These EV-ROI analyses will be compared to an analysis of program effects using more conventional tests of statistical significance and effect size calculations, similar to those already reported. The SHM data will allow an assessment of whether outcomes targeted by the SHM program (relationship dissolution and relationship distress) and secondary outcomes that co-occur with these outcomes (unwed pregnancy, alcohol/drug problems, depression, domestic violence, financial contribution to children, income, and use of public assistance) changed at 30 months as a result of the intervention. These data will be used to produce local average treatment effect estimates for each of these outcomes to determine the number of persons positively impacted by the program. The Return on Investment (ROI) analysis will also be used to suggest an upper limit on what the federal government should be willing to pay for SHM programming. The proposed study will examine the following hypotheses: (1) The effects of family and marriage strengthening initiatives on relationship outcomes yielded by traditional statistical significance tests and effect sizes are small; (2) Positive evidence of change in outcomes using conventional tests, while important, underestimates the true, practical significance of programs as suggested by ROI analysis; (3) ROI

estimates suggest that marriage and family strengthening programs are indeed effective and have a much larger ROI than those achieved by for-profit businesses.

Sample: SHM couple survey data that includes 6,298 couples (12,596 individual survey completers) at baseline who had a low to modest income level and a child under 18 or were expecting a child.

Measures:

Directly Targeted Relationship Outcomes

- Prior Marital Status
- Marital Status
- Living Together
- Relationship Distress

Relationship Outcomes that Co-Occur with Distress/Dissolution

- Unwed Pregnancy
- Alcohol/Drug Problem
- Depression
- Domestic Violence
- Financially Contribute to Child's Upbringing
- Income
- Use of Social Services

Jaipaul L. Roopnarine

Project Title: Paternal Factors and Childhood Outcomes: The Mediating Role of Relationship Quality and Support Networks

Project Funding Years: 2015-2017

Affiliation: Syracuse University

Abstract: There have been several initiatives at the Federal, State, and local levels that have identified fathers as important figures in combating poverty, attenuating the lost developmental potential of young children, improving the nutritional status and safety of children, and reducing experiences with violence during the early childhood years. Researchers from diverse disciplines have identified risks and protective factors within and external to the family that are associated with different dimensions of father engagement and child development outcomes. Despite these advances, little is known about how paternal proximal processes are linked to childhood outcomes and what factors within the family potentially mediate these links in families who participate and do not participate in relationship education. Using cultural-ecological, risk and resilience, and parenting theories/models and complier average causal effect estimates, the study proposes to use secondary data from the Building Strong Families (BSF) project to examine the associations between fathers' responsiveness, depressive symptoms, and experiences of inter-partner violence (IPV) and young children's social and language skills, and whether social support networks and relationship quality mediate these associations differently for families who participated and did not participate in relationship education. The findings from the proposed analyses should build on the preventative scientific approach to family interventions by providing insights into factors within families that serve a protective function against multiple paternal risks on childhood development. The results should be of interest to state and local agencies

that focus on preventing developmental risks to children that are attributed to challenging home and neighborhood environments.

Sample: BSF 15-month and 36-month data set of low-income families and children from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The total sample at baseline consisted of 5,102 unmarried, romantically involved couples.

Measures:

Paternal Responsiveness

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Depressive Symptoms

Relationship Quality

Support and Affection

Constructive and Avoidance of Destructive Conflict Behaviors

Support Network

Program Participation

Childhood Outcome Measures

- Language Skills
- Behavior Problems

Control Variables

- Co-Parenting
- Family Stability
- Poverty Status and Material Hardship
- Father's Age and Ethnicity

Mindy Scott

Project Title: The Hispanic Families of the SHM Evaluation: Structure, Process, and Stability

Project Funding Years: 2014-2016

Affiliation: Child Trends

Abstract: Federal initiatives like the Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) initiative do provide a wealth of information about the couples in these programs, the nature of their relationships, and the well-being of their children—for some of the most vulnerable populations. This is useful because dramatic changes in the structure of U.S. families have created challenges for programs serving low-income families. This is particularly the case for Hispanic populations, who don't always conform to assumptions about what families in need look like. Thus, the SHM data provide a unique opportunity to examine the marriages of low-income Hispanic families in depth, helping to identify what characteristics—programmatic and/or otherwise—are contributing to the health and stability of these families or not. The goal of this project is to develop a strong foundation of knowledge about low-income Hispanic couples through descriptive and exploratory research. Specifically, the study proposes to (1) Describe the levels of marital stability, marital quality, and risk of dissolution for married Hispanic couples in the SHM evaluation; (2) Identify the critical characteristics linked to marital stability, marital quality, and risk of dissolution among Hispanic couples, additionally determining whether any of these characteristics are mediated by relationship quality or change in quality; and (3) Identify which program participation characteristics—

such as dosage or specific services/activities—are linked to marital stability, marital quality, or risk of dissolution among Hispanic couples who received treatment.

Sample: 3,000 couples from the SHM Evaluation dataset in which both partners are Hispanic and at least one partner is Hispanic.

Measures:

Dependent Measures

- Marital stability
- Risk of dissolution
- Marital quality at 30 months

Independent Measures

- Hispanic
- Preferred language
- Born in the U.S.

Predictors of Marital Stability/Dissolution

- Structural Characteristics
- Socioeconomic Characteristics
- Social Support and Values
- Martial Quality

Program Participation and Services

- Dosage of treatment
- Types of activities
- Participation in extended activities
- Contact with Family Support Coordinator
- Payments to the couple
- Referrals

Chrystyna Kouros and Pascal Deboeck

Project Title: Improving Children's Well-being: Identifying Mechanisms and Timing of Family Strengthening Programs for Low-income Families through Differential Equation Modeling

Project Funding Years: 2014-2016

Affiliation: Southern Methodist University

Abstract: The findings reported to date from Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) and related studies have caused others to conclude that healthy marriage initiates are not effective (Johnson, 2014). After reviewing the prior analyses with SHM data, it is premature to conclude that SHM and related programs are not effective for improving marriages and children's lives. The overall objective of this study is to use advanced longitudinal data analysis (derivatives, differential equations) to test theoretically driven hypotheses regarding how and why family strengthening programs work, and when and for whom these programs are maximally effective. The central hypothesis is that using these advanced methods, which can test more nuanced and overlooked theoretical questions about change processes, will advance the field of family strengthening initiatives forward by uncovering relations that may be masked by traditional statistical methods. The specific aims of the study are: (1) Identify the mechanisms through which family strengthening programs improve children's well-being; (2) Identify the optimal time during

children's lives when family strengthening programs provide the maximum benefit for their well-being; and (3) Identify existing family vulnerabilities that may constrain the effectiveness of family strengthening programs for children's well-being.

Samples: Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) dataset which includes 6298 low income couples and their child.

Measures:

Marital Quality
- Survey data
- Survey item data reduction
- Observational data

Child Outcomes (children's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems and reactions to inter-parental conflict)

Parental Psychological Distress

Financial Strain/Economic Security

Parenting

Marital Stability

Program Enrollment/Engagement

Rodney Green

Project Title: Family Strengthening: A Deeper Look at Drivers of Program Success

Project Funding Years: 2014-2015

Affiliation: The Howard University Center for Urban Progress

Abstract: Many studies document large differentials of marriage success by race and age, but the causal predictors, the factors that reliably identify outcomes and point to the factors that contribute to marriage success have yet to be clearly articulated or are contested. In this project, Howard University researchers will study three research questions drawing on three rich longitudinal datasets generated through the Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families supported family strengthening programs. Secondary analysis of these databases will provide additional analysis and reporting on impacts of race, ethnicity, location, socio-economic conditions, and age on understanding the success rate of the three programs. The expected outcomes will help agencies craft improved and culturally competent programming aimed at family strengthening. The research questions this study will address are: (1) Did race and ethnicity-neutral outcome measures generate biased estimates of program impacts in the evaluation of the three programs?; (2) Do local social and economic conditions affect the distribution of program impacts?; and (3) Were program interventions more effective on Hispanic participants than on African American and white participants? Hypotheses related to these research questions will be tested through more detailed factor analysis and econometric applications than that done in previous research studies. The goal of this work is to enrich our knowledge of drivers of program success across various sub-populations.

Sample: Data samples from the Supporting Healthy Marriage and Building Strong Families programs and the U.S. Census Bureau

Measures:

The study will estimate regression equations to test the hypotheses. The coefficients from the estimation and their comparisons are the measures used to test the hypotheses and thus provide answer to the three research questions. The study will reconstruct the outcome variables of interest for blacks, whites and Hispanics separately to improve their internal consistency and reliability.